

**For immediate release  
December 10, 2004**

### **Increase in Meningococcal C Infections Leads to Targeted Vaccination Campaign**

Vancouver - The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) is launching a meningococcal C vaccination program for gay men including teenagers throughout BC, after an unusually high number of cases were recorded in recent weeks.

BCCDC has recorded 19 cases of meningococcal C disease so far this year, with a high proportion – 16 – in men. Since the beginning of October 2004, six cases of meningococcal C have been reported among gay men. Of these six patients, three have died as a result of their infection. This high number of cases suggests that the bacteria have become more widespread in this group.

These cases and their contacts have been interviewed extensively, and no connections or commonalities were found to exist – no common friends, nor attendance at same clubs or social events. The absence of a link or identifiable source has led the BCCDC and regional Medical Health Officers to implement an inoculation campaign targeting gay men including teenagers to reduce risk and minimize further infection. It is important to note that although we are seeing a current increase in meningococcal C infections in gay men, these infections can occur in men and women of all ages, but at this time we are not seeing a increased rate of infection in other groups.

As a result of these recent cases, the BCCDC in partnership with the five Regional Health Authorities will be providing free meningococcal C vaccine to gay men including teenagers. The vaccine will also be available to bisexual men or other men who have sex with men. This vaccine is safe and effective in preventing infection, and similar campaigns have been carried out in the past when similar increases in meningococcal infections have been identified (e.g. most recently among teenagers in Abbotsford in 2001). Gay men who may be at higher risk include those who live in or travel to the Lower Mainland or southern Vancouver Island, who have more than one sexual partner, or who are socially active within the gay community.

Meningococcal disease is caused by a bacterium known as meningococcus. Some people carry this germ in their throat or nose without getting sick. In rare instances, the germ overcomes the body's natural defenses, and causes serious diseases, including bacterial meningitis or meningococemia (a widespread infection of the blood and other organs). The bacteria is spread via saliva through sharing drinks, water bottles, eating utensils, toothbrushes, cigarettes, joints, kissing and sexual contacts where saliva sharing occurs.

High fever, headache, and stiff neck are common symptoms of meningococcal infection, which can develop suddenly. Other symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, discomfort looking into bright lights, confusion and sleepiness. Very few individuals who are exposed to the bacteria will develop meningitis or infections caused by these bacteria, however, meningococcal infection can be very serious, sometimes causing brain damage or death.

BCCDC and Vancouver Coastal Health are asking gay and bisexual men including teenagers to make an appointment with their family physician or local health unit to receive a vaccination.

Health information for patients is available at any time through the BC NurseLine. The toll-free number is 1-866-215-4700 or TTY at 1-866-889-4700. This service offers confidential over-the-phone health advice from registered nurses, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Translation services are available in 130 languages. Information is also available on-line at <http://www.bchealthguide.org/>

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